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ABSTRACT

The approach used to teach English in Japanese high schools is evaluated from the perspective of the skills needed for the university entrance examinations. The tests are examined for item type and for the skills and learning processes needed to answer them. An extensive graded reading program is most appropriate to prepare students for these tests, rather than the current practice of grammar analysis and intensive study of a limited amount of reading material. (MSE)

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UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS AND ENGLISH TEACHING IN JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOLS - A NON-JAPANESE EVALUATION*

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates one argument for the English teaching presently practiced in high schools in Japan, that it is made necessary by the college entrance examinations. The paper attempts to determine what study would be most advantageous for college entrance examinations. College entrance examinations were analyzed for type of test question, to determine the skills needed to answer the questions and the effort necessary to attain these skills. It is concluded that an extensive graded reading program is most appropriate to prepare students for these tests. This is at variance with teaching practice in high schools which appears to employ grammar analysis and an intensive study of very limited amounts of reading material.

*Paper originally presented at the 14th Annual Convention of the Communication Association of the Pacific-Japan held at Kyodai Kaikan on June 16 and 17, 1984 in Kyoto, Japan.

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Introduction

This paper evaluates the validity of one of the reasons given for the English teaching that takes place especially in high schools here in Japan. It is argued that the college entrance examinations justify and necessitate English teaching as it is practiced now. This is often presented as a final argument to prove that teaching in high schools must take place the way it is taking place and that no changes or deviations are possible. The teaching involves teacher dominated, painstakingly detailed translations of shorter and longer texts, grammatical analysis, and study based on isolated sentence examples. The paper examines college entrance examinations, and attempts to determine the skills necessary to take the examinations and what teaching would be effective to attain these skills.

Background

The English knowledge displayed by students entering college is generally considered much poorer than could be expected at the end of six years of English studies. The main deficiencies include a poor comprehension of spoken English, a limited active vocabulary, and difficulties in comprehending (as opposed to analyzing and translating) printed material. When encountering unknown words or words in new contexts, students seem unable to guess at possible meanings. They may attach the meaning of a similarly sounding word to the unknown word and fail to pay attention to the loss of coherence. Further, students are unsure of grammar and spelling and have great trouble dealing with English without a written model.

Inquires into English instruction in high schools, to determine the reasons for these deficiencies, invite a number of responses including inadequate time and facilities, class size, differences in English ability, and poor motivation and readiness to study. These reasons are all partly reflections of the conditions in the high schools themselves. One further response is that college entrance examinations determine what and how English can be taught in high schools. This is outside the control of the high schools, and it is used as an unimpeachable justification to stop all argument.

It is claimed that to prepare students for college entrance examinations it is necessary to teach in the specific manner described above, and the abovementioned deficiencies are but unfortunate unavoidable side effects. It is further claimed that deviating from this way of teaching will be a disservice to the

students.

Data

A detailed survey of the first 35 college entrance tests in the Eigo Mondai Tetteiteki Kenkyu (Kenkyusha Shuppan, 1983), and also the 1983 Kyotsu Ichiji Shiken as published in Gokanen Kyotsu Ichiji Shiken Mondaigun (Seibunsha, 1983) was made. Further, the remaining 86 tests in Eigo Mondai Tetteiteki Kenkyu, the remaining Kyotsu Ichiji Shiken (1979 to 1982 and 1984) and the 214 tests in Zenkoku Daigaku Nyushi Mondai Seikai (Obunsha, 1984) were surveyed more extensively.

Not all tests were surveyed in detail, as the test questions are very similar. The extensive survey of the larger number of tests found no type of test question not already found in the 36 tests that were analyzed in detail. The questions were divided into 39 categories. Gokanen Kyotsu Ichiji Shiken Mondaigunkai lists 14 categories of questions (eight were used in the 1983 test) and in the 35 tests a further 25 categories were classified (total 39). The categories consider the kinds of responses and clues and other materials that are provided.

The Kyotsu Ichiji Shiken (Kyotsu) categories include cloze with a single sentence and longer passages; spelling, accents, and pronunciation; arranging the order of English words to conform to a model; selecting sentences with meanings similar to models; and determining the order of sentences. The categories from the college tests and translation, summaries, rephrasings, composition, grammar, and listening comprehension. The large number of categories not found in the Kyotsu tests is partly explained with the Kyotsu test using objective grading (mark-sheet) while the other tests generally rely on subjective grading (manual evaluation of the answers).

I found it convenient and meaningful to rearrange the 39 categories into three more general groupings: a global, a specific, and a mechanical group. The global group contains questions that require the application and integration of a range of language skills: translation, listening comprehension, summaries, composition, rephrasings, and cloze. Listening comprehension represents a single test with dictation. The specific group has questions about single words that require less integrated skills: single words to complete sentences, spotting words with similar meanings, what specific words ("it" or "them" or similar) refer to, or a determination of misused words. The mechanical group has ques-

tions involving grammar, pronunciation, spelling, and accents.

Of the 14 Kyotsu categories eight were global, three specific, and three mechnical (for 1983: five global, eight specific, and one mechanical), of the further 25 categories, 13 were global, eight specific, and four mechanical. All tests asked global and specific questions.

Fourteen of the 36 tests contained no mechanical questions, however, except for two these were all tests for national universities. Kyotsu 1983, which is a prerequisite for taking tests at national universities, had one set of mechanical questions (pronunciation), so practically all students were exposed to mechanical questions.

Assessing the relative weight of the three groups is difficult, as the points assigned to a question are generally not made public. In one test the mechanical questions may account for as much as 25%, while another has no such questions; specific questions never reach 25% of any test but there are always some; on average they probably carry more weight than mechanical questions. The remaining questions are global, they comprise more than half of the questions and in some tests exceed 75%.

The volume of English that the sudents have to read varies considerably. In Kyotsu 1983 there is approximately 800 words in prose passages, plus the English in the test questions. In the other 35 tests the largest amount of reading was about 2,000 words in prose passages and the least about 200 words. The average reading volume may be about 1,200 words in two or three separate prose pieces, in addition to the English contained in the questions themselves.

The time allowed for completing the tests ranged from 60 to 150 minutes. The weight of the English part (that considered here) of an entrance test may reach 50% of the whole test.

The level of difficulty of a cross section of the prose passages were determined by the Fry Readibility Graph (Tonjes and Zintz, 1981, p. 61). Some passages fell outside the area where the graph is considered to apply; this happens when sentences are short and contain many long words. Those that did fall within the graph were at grade levels from four to nine. These grade levels were crosschecked with McLaughlin's SMOG FORMULA (p. 60) and Stricht's forecast (p. 65), which gave comparable results.

For determinations of difficulty the prose passages are short (less than a book page) and often do not contain a beginning and end (they are perhaps parts of longer passages), however in the tests they are presented as wholes and the grade level of the complete prose piece can not be determined. The accuracy of the determinations of levels must be taken as approximate, and is perhaps too low as the passages often lack a context.

The topics covered by the reading passages appear very varied, and it would be difficult to classify them beyond stating that they generally seem related to literature and the humanities. However there are also passages dealing with scientific topics. The passages are generally selections from longer passages and they rarely conform to a sequence of beginning, middle, and end; rather they contain a part of the middle and are not always easily comprehensible from a reading of the first few sentences, or even one reading of the whole piece.

Other test-taking skills can also be considered: mechanics of test-taking, stress control, time management at the test etc., however only the categories of test questions, the volume to be read, and the level of difficulty; as discussed above, will be used here.

Learning and Teaching Requirements

The results of the analysis above are approximate, but provide a framework for understanding what is required of a student attempting to take a college entrance test. The tests contain a very large proportion of questions requiring a well integrated knowledge of English, although listening and oral production are generally not called for. The level of the English is that required of a ninth or tenth grade student in a country where the native language is English. The student should be well acquainted with literary English and some knowledge of the humanities is helpful. A thorough knowledge of Japanese and the ability to translate from Japanese and English into the other language is necessary. The student should further be able to read and grasp the meaning of the material in English, as the volume of the tests and the time available generally would not allow a detailed analysis of the materials during the tests.

The three question categories, global, specific, and mechanical, represent questions about all aspects of English except oral production. It would then be possible to argue that, as they are

all required for the students taking the tests, any teaching will be advantageous in the study for the tests. It is however possible to limit the options by looking at the requirements and the relative importance of the three groups individually.

The skills for the global questions, the dominant group of questions, can be developed with extensive graded reading. The very large amount to be read at the test, and the need to respond in a variety of ways to the contents of the material requires very versatile skills that only wide ranging reading could impart. The tests use readings from a wide range of fields and it is not possible to recommend specific areas that would be particularly beneficial. Further, a good ability to transform English into Japanese is required, word to word rephrasings are not requested, and translation questions ask for language that would actually be used.

A reading centered approach appears most suitable also for the specific group questions. They require the ablility to grasp meanings and look for clues in the test, and a good knowledge of nuances of word meanings as well as the ability to guess missing elements from limited information; some grammatical knowledge may be helpful with this type of questions.

For the mechanical group, the study of grammar texts and dictionaries is necessary, but well developed reading skills are also helpful. A knowledge of grammar and accents, pronunciation, and spelling as detailed in dictionaries commonly available in Japan is required. Hearing was used in a single test, and the inclusion of listening practice can only be justified if it is evaluated to be useful beyond oral comprehension questions.

The maximum level of difficulty (ninth grade) would indicate that reading skills must be well developed and comparable to the reading skills that first grade high school students have in Japanese. The importance of the three groups decrease from the dominant global through the specific to the mechanical group. Global questions always represent more than half of the questions, and probably the prose passages take up a larger proportion of the examination time. As a result reading must be the main vehicle in preparing for college entrance tests.

The mechanical group calls for a good knowledge of grammar, but the questions are limited in scope and do not require knowledge of little used forms. The dictionary study required for the accents and pronunciation can concentrate on words that tradi-

tionally are difficult for Japanese students, and need not take up much time.

Considering that only six years of study must prepare the student for the tests, the importance of developing reading skills stand out. The study must concentrate on extensive graded reading for comprehension, include enough grammar to enable recognition of the major grammatical forms, and the mechanical aspects of English should not be entirely neglected.

Concentrating on developing reading skills and not stressing aural and oral skills seems justified when studying only to take college entrance examinations. However, a stress on grammatical analysis and intensive study of ungraded, limited (in volume) texts does not seem justified, and may even be a disservice to the students.

Conclusion

The above has considered the study required if only college entrance examinations are the goal of English studies. This narrow scope was selected as college entrance examinations are frequently used to justify the English teaching in high schools. The English teaching that is justified as preparing students for college entrance examinations is the analysis of short reading pieces, with heavy doses of grammar, and word to word rephrasings into English. It is concluded that, for the college entrance examinations, such practices are possibly not justified. Reading should be extensive, grammar limited, and translation into Japanese should concentrate on conveying the content in fluent Japanese.

In a survey of methods used in secondary English teaching in Japan, Bowers (1983) finds that mechanical instructional aids are widely available but, except for tape recorders, surprisingly little is used. It may be the case that a concern with college entrance examinations causes teachers to avoid using these aids, which could make the teaching less teacher centered and so less acceptable as preparation for the tests. Still, as teaching does not seem to be aimed at college entrance examinations, the limited use of mechanical instructional aids must be due to other reasons.

In conclusion, it may be stated that the deficiencies displayed by high school graduates cannot be justified with references to the requirements for college entrance tests. The discrepancy between teaching practices and the tests that are used as arguments for

not changing teaching practices, greatly puzzles the writer. However, taking the conclusion to be valid, it becomes necessary to understand why entrance examinations are still used to justify English teaching in high schools. Such reasons could include the difficulty of changing traditional teaching practices, the unavailability of suitable teaching materials, the class environment in high schools, or perhaps the low motivation created by ostensibly studying for the entrance tests as the goal.

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